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ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken at the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP) to understand why some at-risk students are able to beat the odds and achieve educational success while others are not. The theoretical underpinnings for this research draw from psychological, societal, and institution-specific models of student persistence. All 1996 CCP graduates were surveyed and asked if they ever considered dropping out of college. About half returned surveys, and of the respondents, 27% had considered dropping out. A questionnaire explored personality traits, economic factors, and institutional experiences students perceived as affecting their progress towards graduation. Aspects of personality such as confidence, discipline, and perseverance, as well as encouragement of faculty and other students, greatly influenced degree completion. Discouraging institutional experiences included rude treatment by staff, unavailability of courses, and ineffective course advisement. A focus group of 12 students discussed their personal experiences, citing positive in-classroom and out-of-classroom experiences with faculty as integral to their continued enrollment. Detrimental aspects included course-related difficulties and communication problems with faculty. Determination and external factors such as family support also precluded degree completion. The majority of graduates had either obtained jobs or successfully transferred to other institutions of higher education. Contains 12 references. (YKH)

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COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF PHILADELPHIA

Beating the Odds: Reasons For At-Risk Student Success at Community College of Philadelphia

Office of Institutional Research
Report # 93
Prepared by Jane Grosset

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Introduction

The term 'at-risk' has been used in educational circles to describe students who have a less than normal chance of realizing a successful educational outcome. The typical at-risk student profile which emerges from the literature is characterized by under-preparation for college-level studies and there is a sizable body of literature (Cross, 1971; Astin, 1975; Zwerling, 1976) which demonstrates that students who are academically under-prepared have the highest attrition rate of any group in higher education.

This study was undertaken in order to better understand why some at-risk students are able to beat the odds and achieve educational success while others do not. Since graduation was the benchmark used to measure student success in this study, the theoretical underpinnings for this research draw from psychological, societal and institution-specific models of student persistence. Psychological models of educational persistence, which emphasize the impact of individual abilities and dispositions upon student departure (Marks, 1967; Rossman and Kirk, 1970; Waterman and Waterman, 1972), point to the importance of intellectual attributes in shaping the individuals ability to meet the academic demands of college life and stress the roles personality, motivation, and disposition play in influencing the student's willingness to meet those demands. Societal theories emphasize the impact of wider social and economic forces on the behavior of students within institutions of higher education (Feasherman and Hauser, 1978; Pincus, 1980). Student departures are seen as part of a larger process of social stratification which operates to preserve existing patterns of educational and social inequality. While societal theories stress the importance of external forces in the process of student persistence, institution-specific models, such as Spady, 1971; Pascarella, 1980; Bean, 1986; and Tinto, 1987, emphasize the importance of college

experiences in a students's decision to drop or persist.

In this study, qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were used to explore which factors suggested by persistence theories were most instrumental in the persistence of at-risk students to graduation. As a first step in data collection, all 1996 Community College of Philadelphia graduates (n = 1150) were surveyed and asked if they ever considered dropping out of the College. Approximately half of the graduates returned usable questionnaires and 27% of respondents had considered dropping out of the College at some point. As a follow-up to this item, the questionnaire also contained several open-ended questions that explored personality traits, economic factors and institutional experiences students perceived as contributing to or interfering with their progress towards graduation.

Profile of At-Risk Students Who Beat the Odds

One hundred seventy-eight (178) of the 1166 associate degrees awarded by Community College of Philadelphia in 1996 were earned by students who were placed in CAP A, CAP B, CAP C or ACT NOW when they initially enrolled at the College. As a whole, these students were extremely tenacious in the pursuit of their degree. On average, they were enrolled eight semesters prior to graduating; initial enrollment for some graduates extended back to Fall 1984.

The majority of former developmental students who graduated were enrolled in one of the General Studies curricula during their first semester. One-quarter were enrolled in the 'undecided' General Studies curriculum and another 43.3% were enrolled in a General Studies interest area curriculum (mostly Allied Health). The most frequent graduation curricula were General Studies with an interest (45%) and General Studies undecided (21%).

Some graduates experienced academic difficulties during their early enrollment at the

College. Eighteen percent were placed on probation for poor academics or progress during their enrollment at the College and 6.5% had been dropped from the College at some point while completing their studies.

Why Students Persist

Aspects of personality, such as confidence, determination, discipline, diligence and perseverance, were cited most frequently as characteristics that enabled graduates to continue their studies. Clear cut educational and career goals, the belief that education is the key to future success, and the desire to succeed were also frequently cited influences on persistence. Institutional experiences which most influenced students to persist to degree completion were encouragement from faculty and, to a lesser extent, the encouragement of other students. Discouraging institutional experiences included rude treatment by staff, course cancellations, the unavailability of important courses at convenient times and locations, and ineffective course advisement. Important external factors to the persistence process included lack of financial concerns, encouragement of family and friends, desire to improve socio-economic status of self and family, employer demands for educated labor force, and the availability of financial aid grants and loans.

Given the richness of information available from these open-ended survey items, it was decided to continue this line of inquiry in a focus group setting. Towards this end, students who started their studies at the College as developmental students were identified from the pool of 933 associate degree graduates in 1997. Included among graduates were 25 (2.7%) students who started their studies at the College as CAP A students; 65 (7.0%) former CAP B students ; 10 (1.1%) former CAP C students; and 71 (7.6%) former ACT NOW students. Twelve graduates from this developmental pool participated in a focus group to discuss their

perceptions of factors that contributed to or interfered with their progress towards graduation.

Focus group participants were extremely enthusiastic concerning their experiences at the College and the group discussion validated many of the points raised by questionnaire respondents. Positive in-classroom and out-of-classroom experiences with faculty were viewed by most group participants as extremely important to their continued enrollment. Many graduates cited specific instructors who were instrumental in sparking their enthusiasm for learning, clarifying their educational goals, influencing their career choices, and serving as a point-of-reference to resolve barriers to their continued enrollment at the College.

While grads perceived most of their classroom experiences as affirming, several graduates did note some course-related difficulties which, at the time, diminished their resolve to earn a degree. Several graduates experienced communication problems with some faculty for whom English was a second language. An engineering graduate in the group explained how he and fellow students formed a study group to compensate for teacher/student communication problems. Peer support and satisfying relationships with other students was a recurrent theme throughout the discussion, especially for graduates in the Behavioral Sciences.

Two students described intimidating first-day course experiences during which instructors predicted that half of the students would not last through the semester and half of those who remained in the class would fail. One student considered dropping out of the College but instead, acting on advice from an advisor, dropped only the course. Another student confronted with a similar situation remained in the course since it was her last semester and took time off from work in order to meet regularly with a tutor. Although she feared she would receive a D as a final course grade, she earned a B.

A few graduates expressed disappointment with their developmental course placement but their discouragement was balanced by several group members, typically older students who had not been in a classroom in some time and welcomed the opportunity to brush up on rusty basic skills.

While focus group participants presently viewed themselves as highly motivated, several younger members said that was not the case when they initially enrolled at the College. One student recounted how she enrolled to avoid working and gradually came to an appreciation of the importance of education, both in terms of short-term employment opportunities and long-term quality-of-life issues for her family.

Determination and success sometimes came in the form of avoiding negative situations. One participant indicated that beyond having faith in her own abilities, it was necessary to ignore nay-sayers. Another participant was determined to complete her studies because of her dissatisfaction with other options.

Many graduates indicated how important their children were to their success. This support motivated them to succeed as did their desire to be a good role model for their children by impressing on them the importance of higher education and the rewards of learning. One gradate used study time as an opportunity to bring the family together and "...show her children the way, not just talk about it ". The support of mothers and grandmothers for educational pursuits was also viewed as important, especially by younger graduates.

In general, students found the institutional culture and physical facilities to be welcoming. One graduate viewed the College as a haven from the harsh realities of her neighborhood environment.

Institutional services perceived by students as helpful in pursuit of their degree were the library; learning lab services, such as tutoring and workshops; the counseling center; computer labs, although there was general agreement that the labs were too crowded and lacked sufficient support for novices; the Bucknell Program; Center on Disabilities; and internships. Graduates also valued the 'real world' experiences of instructors who were working in their respective fields and could bring these experiences to the classroom. The majority of the group cited rude treatment by staff as another institutional barrier they had to endure while enrolled.

Post-Graduation Career and Transfer Experiences

Since successfully completing their programs of study at the College, many 1996 graduates who started as at-risk students have found employment or continued their studies elsewhere. Nine months following graduation, 40% of these former students had enrolled at another college. Eighty percent of former developmental students who transferred reported loosing credits in the transfer process, averaging 16 credits per graduate. Developmental courses, such as Math 116 and 117 and English 098 and 099, were cited most frequently as the courses that failed to transfer.

Most graduates who transferred (82%) felt they received adequate support and information from staff at the College and 92% felt that their community college courses adequately prepared them to continue their education.

At the time of the survey, 46% of graduates were employed in a job related to their studies; 19% were employed in an unrelated job; 18% were not employed because they were continuing their education; 2% were unavailable for employment; and 14% were unemployed and seeking employment. The majority of working students (86%) found

their present job after graduating from the College. The average salary graduates were making at the time of the survey was $24,522.

Compared with all other 1996 graduates, the transfer outcomes of former developmental students were equally positive while their employment-related experiences were slightly less so. Former developmental students were more than twice as likely to be unemployed and looking for a job and, if employed, earned, on average, $3,000 less per year than other working graduates.

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